

# PROPHETS

## Nova Scotia Shooting Case

*A new approach to prevention*

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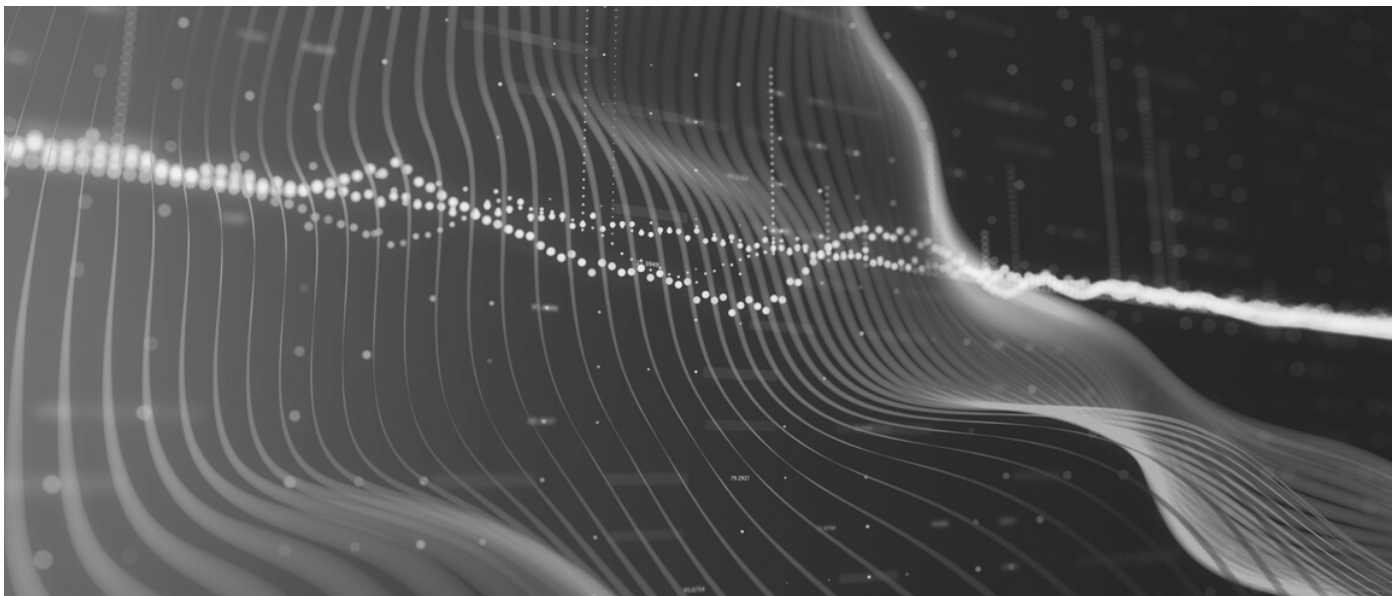


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### **This short analysis aims to:**

- (a) describe the event of the Nova Scotia shooting, based on open source information;
- (b) check additional facts related to the shooting, as a basis for a more in-depth analysis;
- (c) identify potential early warnings that could have helped to prevent the attack;
- (d) analyse prevention from a new perspective, questioning how to better address and prevent cases of violent extremism and social instability.

The analysis is based on open-source information from different newspapers, and on the report published by DSH Consulting on Nova Scotia mass shooting, analysing the facts and events and outlining considerations. Furthermore, Agenfor International ([www.agenformedia.com](http://www.agenformedia.com)) developed in-depth research into preventive measures for violent extremism within the EU-funded project PROPHETS, which serves as point for reflection for this article.

### **About PROPHETS**

The H2020 EU-funded project PROPHETS aims to improve the understanding of online behavioural radicalisation and to identify online factors that lead to violent extremism. PROPHETS maps out, cross-validates and examines the processes, mechanisms, and the means in and through which online behavioural radicalisation occurs. The project identifies a number of grounds regarding the interaction of online radicalisation, cyber criminality, and the internet that have yet to be adequately addressed. Additionally, the project will help prevent terrorist cyber criminality by building resilience in people and wider society. The project will achieve its key objectives through developing a number of tools to enhance LEAs' proactive online investigatory skills concerning the area of behavioural radicalisation linked to terrorist online criminality.

## The event

Between the 18th and 19th of April 2020, Gabriel Wortman killed 22 people in the Canadian Province of Nova Scotia, injuring three others and setting 16 locations on fire, before being killed by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) in Enfield. Nova Scotia Premier Stephen McNeil addressed the incident during a COVID-19 briefing, saying the events were "one of the most senseless acts of violence in our province's history." (1) The attack started as a domestic violence incident between the perpetrator and his spouse, as the couple returned home from a nearby party on the 18th of April at around 22:00. The perpetrator handcuffed his spouse but she managed to escape and fled into the woods. The perpetrator set the house on fire and then returned to the party where he started shooting, killing 13 victims. From 22:26 that evening – when the first gunshot was reported – until 11:40 the following morning, 19th of April, the perpetrator killed a further nine people, and set another 15 locations on fire. The perpetrator appeared to be driving a police car and wearing police uniform. The first Tweet posted by the RCMP was released in the late evening of the 18th of April (early morning local time), in which an active shooting situation was officially reported.



The perpetrator continued moving, taking the Highway 4 to Wentworth, to the house of residents he knew. He arrived and killed the two residents and the neighbour and set the house on fire, before continuing to Glenmore. Thirteen hours later, he was shot in Enfield while refueling his vehicle in a service area, after having killed 6 other people and set 14 other locations ablaze.

## Additional facts

The Chief Superintendent confirms it was between 7 a.m. and 8 a.m. that police learned from a witness that the suspect was dressed as an RCMP officer and driving a vehicle that looked like a police car. That information, including a photo of the car, was not relayed on Twitter until late morning of the 19th of April.



(1) <https://atlantic.ctvnews.ca/shooting-one-of-the-most-senseless-acts-of-violence-in-nova-scotia-s-history-premier-1.4902917>



"The information about the vehicle, the clothing, took some time to learn from the one witness and once that information was compiled, it was immediately tweeted by our communications section," the Chief Superintendent said.

Nova Scotia RCMP have yet to release a complete timeline of the 13.5-hour rampage. It remains unclear at what time the victims were killed.

Furthermore, the decision to use social media – and specifically Twitter – instead of the “Alert Ready” System, was openly criticised, since social media are seen as less effective in informing the public about imminent threats. (2)

### WHAT IS THE ALERT READY SYSTEM (3)

The National Public Alerting System, branded as Alert Ready, is the national warning system in Canada. The system consists of infrastructure and standards for the presentation and distribution of public alerts issued by government authorities

(including Environment and Climate Change Canada and other provincial public safety agencies), such as weather emergencies, AMBER Alerts, and other emergency notifications, by all broadcasters and last mile distributors in the affected region, including television stations, radio stations, television providers, and LTE mobile networks in the affected region. The system is based upon the Common Alerting Protocol and uses the National Alert Aggregation and Dissemination system (NAAD) operated by Pelmorex Media as its backend for distributing alerts to broadcasters, alongside with a style guide that dictates when and how alerts are to be broadcast. Pelmorex also handles public marketing of the system.

(2) <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/reuters/canada-police-accused-of-poor-communication-during-nova-scotia-mass-shooting/45709834>

(3) <https://www.alertready.ca/>



For what concerns the vehicle, according to the RCMP, the police vehicle used by Wortman in the attacks was obtained in the fall of 2019. Furthermore, in an email correspondence between the Truro police Cpl. Greg Densmore and a redacted RCMP email address, it was reported that Wortman had six plated vehicles registered in his name at that time and one unplated vehicle. (4) Wortman had fitted the vehicle with a light bar and decals that made it look almost identical to a genuine RCMP vehicle.

The multiple weapons Wortman used in the attacks had been obtained illegally and they originate from the US.

### Early Warnings

There are several early warnings to be taken into consideration before outlining the considerations.

In May 2011, Truro Police received a tip from an unnamed source via email about Wortman's stash of guns and his desire to "kill a cop". The source told police that Wortman was "under a lot of stress lately" and was starting to have some mental health issues, describing him as "becoming a little squirrely." (5) It is unclear what action was taken by them, and the tip was ultimately purged from their records (6). "We can't speak about specifics of the follow up to the 2011 bulletin because our database records have been purged as per our retention policies," Jennifer Clarke, spokesperson for the Nova Scotia RCMP, stated.

She added, "Preliminary indications are that we were aware and at minimum provided assistance to [Halifax Regional Police], which aligns with the RCMP's approach for such enquiries." But the 2011 bulletin was the second time in less than a year that the police had been made aware of Wortman's potential to become violent. The bulletin described how Wortman was investigated for "uttering death threats to his parent" on June 2, 2010. The same investigation also included information that he had several guns (7).

In 2013, a former neighbour in Portapique reported him to the RCMP for assaulting his spouse and having a cache of illegal firearms, but they declined to take firmer action as they had not received a complaint from the partner. The former neighbour ended up leaving Portapique after Wortman became more aggressive and threatening her in response to the complaint (8).

The perpetrator was also known to the police, with a criminal conviction for assault and the illegal possession of weapons, for which he received a sentence of 9 months' probation. Statements of witnesses and colleagues also pointed to instability and social problems, describing him as a "sociopath", "controlling and paranoid" about the covid-19 crisis, and as an "abusive sociopath" (9).

(4) <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/ns-gunman-2011-warning-1.5589277>

(5) <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/ns-gunman-2011-warning-1.5589277>

(6) Donkin, Karissa; McMillan, Elizabeth (May 29, 2020). "2011 tip that warned N.S. gunman wanted 'to kill a cop' was purged from RCMP records". CBC News. Retrieved May 29, 2020.

(7) <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/ns-gunman-2011-warning-1.5589277>

(8) Tutton, Michael (May 13, 2020). "Neighbour reported N.S. mass shooter's domestic violence, weapons to police". CBC News. Retrieved May 13, 2020

(9) <https://globalnews.ca/news/6959086/nova-scotia-gunman-sociopath-paranoid-police-docs/>

Therefore, there were multiple early warnings/indicators that Wortman could have been dangerous and that information was even shared to the public, but no action was taken to prevent it. The spokesperson for the Nova Scotia police RCMS stated that as the manhunt for the gunman began in Portapique late on April 18, the RCMP did not have the information in the 2011 bulletin at their disposal as it had been purged from their records. When asked whether that information could have been helpful to officers who responded to the shooting, the spokesperson said it was difficult to say: "I mean, it's hypothetical if there is something that could've been done to prevent this," continuing "I think myself and any number of people would want to know that. But I don't know" (10).

### **General Consideration on Prevention**

Based on the events and on the multiple early warnings described above, we would like to outline some considerations, grounded in a simple question: was it appropriate to directly inform the police of the perpetrator's behavioural instability, as an early warning sign? Or could his instability have been better addressed by healthcare and welfare services?

Police Powers, Prevention and the "indicator crimes": In Europe and beyond its borders, there are many cases of violent extremist attacks committed by individuals who have shown early signs of psychological instability or social grievances. In many of those cases, the local police were informed and aware of the potential risk, but they were not able to prevent the attacks, for a variety of reasons – see the London Bridge (11) attack as an example, or the case of Adel Kermiche (12)

A similar trend can be seen among a variety of Foreign Terrorist Fighters who left Europe in order to join terror-related organisations such as ISIS, like the Italian case of Meryam Rehaly. The perpetrators of the above-mentioned cases have all shown early signs of social instability, grievances, perception of social injustice, mental-health issues, etc. and addressing these at an early stage may have prevented their escalations. The profiling of the perpetrators was well-known to local law enforcement agencies and some of them were "red-flagged" internationally, but they still got to the point of committing a crime. The perpetrator of the Nova Scotia shooting presented behavioral and social problems, as well as a potential conflict with the police – implied through behaviours such as cloning the car, dressing up as a policeman, or stating that he wanted to "kill a cop" – but despite these potential indicators, there was still no intervention until he had committed one of the largest shootings Nova Scotia ever experienced.

Based on these considerations and acknowledging that we are operating in the field of PREVENTION\*\*, we ask ourselves whether raising concerns about Nova Scotia shooter's behaviour to LEAs was the best decision -- a vital question for the prevention of violent extremist attacks.

(10) <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/ns-gunman-2011-warning-1.5589277>

(11) <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/live/2019/nov/29/london-bridge-incident-police-city> (12)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/28/world/europe/france-attack-priest-church-syria.html>

## **\*\*PREVENTION**

In general terms, 'crime prevention' refers to the strategies and measures that seek to reduce the risk of crimes occurring and their potential harmful effects on individuals and society. However, a legal and procedural difference exists between legal and/or administrative preventive measures and socio-preventive measures. The first are under the jurisdiction of LEAs and magistrates, while the latter of the subject of actions undertaken by welfare and psychological agencies. The two types of preventive measures are regulated by very diverse and often diverging codes of conduct, laws, scopes and proceedings.

In the Gabriel Wortman case - as in many others - the police had the power to intervene, as there were several hypotheses of crime. We will refer to these crimes as 'indicator crimes', i.e. minor offences that can be indicators of more complex processes. Domestic and gender violence and illegal possession of weapons are among the most common indicator crimes, along with the falsification of documents, offences against public property and theft. Mostly, those minor crimes can be preliminary signs and therefore, indicators of serious crimes. However, it is clear, that the police did not have effective preventive powers to anticipate the transition from the so-called indicator crimes to the most serious ones. The crimes committed by Wortman between 2010 and 2019, for which he was investigated and subjected to judicial measures, did not go against the legal personality of the state (in contrast to cases of terrorism) and did not present characteristics of social danger or indicate the threefold malice intention (*dolo*), that would follow - such characteristics are necessary in order to suspect escalation to terrorism or for LEAs to justify taking exceptional measures (13).

The potential use of additional preventive or security measures by the police, in the absence of the associative offence, would probably not have been legally legitimate in most Western countries. But also, the application of preventive administrative measures or judicial security measures for counter-terrorism purposes, for such matters, tend to have the opposite results for those involved, whose feelings of being persecuted are in fact confirmed. Moreover, when dealing with indicator crimes, these measures can only be short-term, even if they are taken to protect people, and at most they can be used to gain time or to safeguard victims, such as in the case of sexual offences. Yet it is difficult to imagine their effectiveness for countering terrorism. It is therefore not by chance or for reasons of inefficiency that police forces throughout the West, from 2004 onwards, have had difficulties in preventing terrorist attacks, serious crimes and massacres that have taken place in the Western world, despite the thousands of reports and information available and the incredible amount of money invested in policies to combat radicalisation.

(13) On this matter see <https://www.agenformedia.com/publication/jsafe-handbooks-policy-recommendations/>

This apparent inefficiency lies in the fact that the police are an executive power, which has the task of preventing and prosecuting crimes and threats against citizens and national interests, as well as maintaining public order. Radicalisation does not fall within this area, as it does not constitute a crime and radicalised individuals who have not committed a crime are therefore protected by fundamental rights legislation. Moreover, the indicator crimes that anticipate such mechanisms of escalation towards serious forms of crime, from massacres to terrorism or organised crime, do not allow police forces and the judiciary to take preventive and legal security measures that are in line with the rule of law. To go beyond the rule of law, in name of anti-terrorism, means exposing societies to other very serious risks of violence, an imbalance between the powers of the state, and unpredictable attacks on social cohesion.

**The Privatisation of Security:** a second interpretation emerges from the several analyses of cases that international police define as ‘homegrown terrorism’, such as the Wortman case. It seems like there is a tendency to attribute an ideological root, in this case the label of white supremacy, to those criminals who commit very serious crimes (14), especially when referring to terrorism.

Therefore, according to these approaches, prevention activities would be activities aimed at supporting people “at risk”, especially those communities considered vulnerable, such as religious and other minorities, by monitoring their online speeches, profiling accounts, networks and

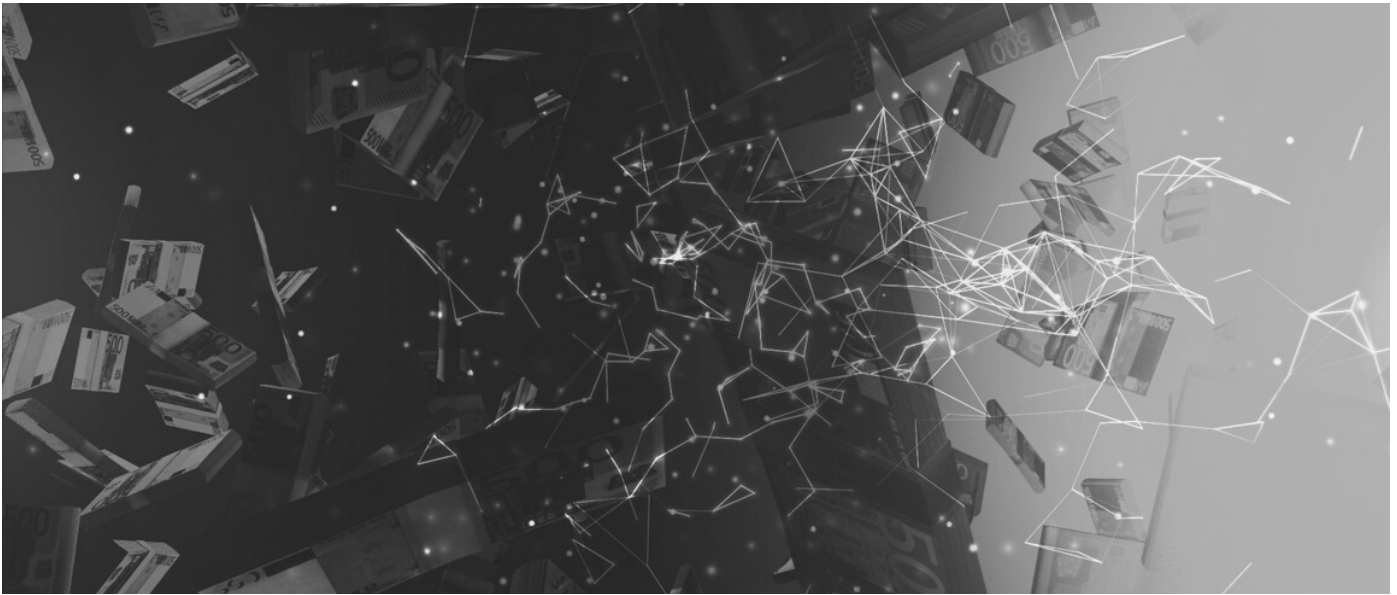
deleting ‘suspicious’ messages or supposedly inciting hatred, in the absence of minimum legal guarantees for the ‘suspects’. The idea that ideologies are the main driver within the process of radicalisation towards crime, began to spread in Europe in 2004, driven by the Dutch Presidency and followed by the British. Thus, paving the way for the “PREVENT” strategy adopted in the UK in 2003 and by the EU (2004). The logical consequence of this simplistic idea, which disconnects deviance and crime – including terrorism – from the contextual factors (the so-called ‘relational and constructed co-causes’ theorised by Martha Crenshaw and Della Porta and articulated into micro-meso-macro factors), is that LEAs have embarked on ‘intelligence-led’ operations, aimed to counter ideas which may seem “dangerous” for the wider society. However, as these activities transcended the powers of the LEAs in most constitutionally based countries, new prevention models have been activated in many Western states and in Europe, based on the delegation of social police functions to private individuals. At the centre of these activities are bodies such as Europol’s EU IRU, RAN and the ESCN (15).

Through hybrid intelligence activities, Western LEAs are now circumventing national regulatory constraints on surveillance and prevention, which impose judicial control over these preventive measures and the collection of information protected by the GDPR or the Police Directive for profiling activities that did not constitute crimes.

(14) <https://nowtoronto.com/news/nova-scotia-mass-shooting-media-rcmp/>

(15) <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eca/special-reports/radicalisation-13-2018/en/>





The suspects of these ‘ideological pre-crimes’, however, are not investigated or entered into any register because there is no crime nor, in most cases, administrative measures proportionate to the type of danger in the absence of an identifiable crime. Therefore, since they are not investigated, these suspects have no information nor legal guarantee. As a consequence, in the online public sphere, the tendency has emerged to delegate activities to prevent terrorism to private companies, such as Facebook or Twitter, allowing private platform managers to remove contents and accounts according to their ‘community standards’.

In addition to the legal doubts, these private prevention activities in online public spaces are likely to be counterproductive. In fact, these opaque preventive actions tend to polarise individuals and society, victimising the affected subjects, strengthening identity and group ties, and moving deeper and deeper into the network, from the dark web to refined encryption tools and communications.

Moreover, strong doubts remain about the preventive effectiveness of these actions, considering that more and more often there are phenomena of ‘labeling’ and ‘biased surveillance’. The use of ideological labels was denounced as dangerous by Peter Clarke, Scotland Yard’s CT Commander, as early as 2005. Rik Coolsaet (2016) and (16) Jonathan Githen-Mazer (2010) raised suspicions (17) that these practices undermined fundamental rights such as “freedom of speech and the very essence of liberal democracy were endangered” (pg. 14) and generated dangerous forms of social polarisation and mutual radicalisation.

One of the greatest risks of the ideologisation of security, however, remains the growing danger that parts of the security apparatus and police forces themselves may further motivate radicalisation, generating moments of strong social conflict, such as the Black Lives Matter Movement or the ‘opposite extremism’ in Europe, from which the terrible terrorism of the ‘70s was born.

(16) Coolsaet R., *All Radicalisation is Local. The genesis and drawback of an elusive concept*, Egmont, 2016

(17) Githens-Mazer, J., *Rethinking the Causal Concept of Islamic Radicalisation. Working Paper of the Committee on Concepts and Methods*, January 2010

Social-preventive measures: Wortman's massacre was framed as an act of generated terrorism, inspired by white supremacist ideology (18). However, if we dig deep into the case, we find that behind the indicator crimes and the deviance of Wortman, there is one aspect that nobody seems to worry about: his mental instability and his social grievances – what in criminological terms is defined as grievance collector (19). There are now hundreds of cases of homegrown terrorism where diseases, especially psychiatric ill-health, merges with violent escalation.

The society around Wortman, his family, neighbors and colleagues had noticed heavy signs of mental and behavioral discomfort. But these were mistakenly reported to a security force and interpreted from a securitarian perspective, bringing them to police attention. But as we have seen, the police did not actually have preventive tools to counter the escalation, nor did they think about interacting with other social agencies for preventing the escalation. They simply divulged the file, as happened many times in European countries. The British police study of 500 cases – dealt with by Channel, an anti-radicalisation scheme – found that 44% of the individuals involved in terrorist acts, were assessed as being likely to have vulnerabilities related to mental health or psychological difficulties. A further 15% were assessed as possibly having vulnerabilities but more assessment was needed (20).

The securitisation of these cases, especially those in prison, often leads to an aggravation of the conditions of these subjects and consequently to a speeding up of the processes of violent escalation

There is a scene from the film *Joker* that perfectly marks the transition between before and after, between Jack Napier and Joker. When Jack Napier, in his 'civil' clothes, as man with severe psychic problems, finds himself facing the psychiatrist of the health service to get his medicines, she informs him that because of the cuts in the social and health system, the services he had enjoyed until then, and which kept him only precariously balanced, would no longer be provided, nor would he have access to the medicine he needed. It is the time when a man becomes a criminal, the Joker, who sets society on fire. Something similar is happening with social and welfare services, which are a real embankment to a large part of the phenomena of terrorism and radicalisation, which are being depleted by restrictive social policies, while huge amounts of money are spent on security and armaments. The 'refunding' of services to citizens able to raise those embankments for preventing the escalation from social discomfort to violent acts, is where we should be investing today.

(18) [https://www.salon.com/2020/04/26/lets-call-the-nova-scotia-mass-shooting-what-it-is-white-male-terrorism\\_partner](https://www.salon.com/2020/04/26/lets-call-the-nova-scotia-mass-shooting-what-it-is-white-male-terrorism_partner)

(19)

<https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2020/04/24/nova-scotia-shooter-was-likely-grievance-collector-says-former-fbi-profiler.html>

(20) <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/may/20/police-study-radicalisation-mental-health-problems>

*\*The opinions expressed in the articles are those of the authors and do not necessary reflect those of Agenfor, however they are important insights for the public debate*

# PROPHETS



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